

“Transforming Lives”

Inauguration Address Dr. Elsa M. Nuñez, President Eastern Connecticut State University April 13, 2007

Thank you, Chairman McHugh, Vice-Chairman Krapek, trustees, Chancellor Carter, and Dr. Levin for that wonderful moving investiture ceremony. I would also ask everyone to join me in thanking the Eastern Brass Ensemble and Concert Chorale, under the direction of Dr. David Belles, a member of the faculty, for the marvelous music we have been hearing this morning. To the Inauguration Committee, I say thank you for planning an incredible set of activities this week – to Rhona Free, the Chair, I am so grateful to you. Thank you. To every member of the maintenance staff at Eastern, you have truly made this day happen. I am extremely grateful.

I also would like to thank everyone who has spoken so graciously on my behalf today —Mr. Sanborn, Ms. Toner, Ms. O’Connor, Mrs. Mead Hoar, First Selectman Paulhus, Dr. Reynolds, Dr. Purce, Dr. Fernandez, Commissioner Lewis, and Dr. Norton — thank you very much for your kind words of encouragement and support. To our other distinguished guests, I extend a heartfelt thank you for helping make this a very special day in the history of Eastern. To my colleagues here at Eastern, I say that you have made my first year at Eastern absolutely wonderful. To the outstanding students of Eastern, you make me proud to be President!

I want to thank everyone in the audience, as well, for taking the time to attend this inauguration. You have filled my heart with joy today.

I want to thank Chairman McHugh and the other trustees again today for entrusting this institution to me. I am here because the Board of Trustees had faith in my abilities. And I took this job because I have faith in the Chancellor and the Board. This is a Board that is truly committed to the university system. They care about the students, and they respect the faculty and staff. Chairman McHugh is an incredible chair, a feisty leader, a man with a formidable intellect, who knows what is right and works each day to bring the resources so desperately needed to the Universities. I am honored to serve as President for this Board and serve with you, Chairman McHugh.

My mother and father are here today — Carmen and Juan Nuñez. They came to this country with a dream and very, very little money. My father came first, as did many men of that era. He came not knowing the language, not having a relative or friend in this country, and with \$10 to his name. I met a man in Puerto Rico once, who is extremely wealthy, who told me that my father was the only person – one out of six men – who paid him back the \$65 they borrowed from him to get to the United States. This is what a plane ticket cost at that time. My father and mother are the most patriotic Americans you will ever meet – they believe in the American dream: they came with very little and they went back to Puerto Rico to live in a fine home and are having a comfortable retirement. They could not have done this without this great country. My father has said over and over – there is no greater nation than the United States! They encouraged me to go to college and take advantage of the opportunities that were available. They made huge sacrifices for me to be able to stand before you today.

To my husband, Richard; my children, Antony, Maria, and Rosalyn, and my grandchildren Avery and Ethan, I thank you for the support of a loving, caring family. You have loved me and given me so much for which to be thankful and you go out of your way to make it possible for me to have it all. I feel truly blessed.

To my extended family and friends who are here today – I am so grateful to you for celebrating with me on this momentous day! You have made this occasion very special.

I am the product of a state university, and my first faculty appointment as a professor was at a public, liberal arts college — Ramapo College of New Jersey, where I taught English for many years. I share our faculty's commitment to undergraduate teaching as I did as a faculty member.

I am very proud of this faculty, and I feel comfortable around you, in part because you have welcomed me into this intellectual community. Thank you. Each of you works extremely hard – through your teaching, and scholarly and creative work, you have built a strong, intellectually vibrant community here. I am proud to be your colleague.

It has been noted that I am not the first, but rather the sixth president of Eastern. The leaders who have come before me have built a strong foundation.

Our fifth president is with us today. The students here still talk about you, Dr. Carter. They love you. One student who I met last fall said to me — “Dr. Nuñez you will have big shoes to fill.” He was right! The campus is modern and beautiful, largely due to your leadership, Dr. Carter. You led Eastern's efforts to focus our mission on the liberal arts. And you convinced people to invest in this University. Since I have arrived you have also been very gracious and supportive of me as I learn my new role. For all that you have done for Eastern, Mr. Chancellor, for all that you are doing for this fine University system, and for all that I know you intend to do for the ‘Jewel of Connecticut’, I thank you. You are a role model for me and an inspiration.

Each of our past presidents has advanced the mission of this institution while transforming the lives of those who studied here. I urge you to learn more about them in the memento book that was placed on your chair. We are proud of our past – of our education program and other professional programs – and share this brief history with you for that reason. From the children on the cover, to the stories of family, to the examples of academic excellence and rigor, to our ever-evolving mission, it is clear that the people of Eastern have been moved by a powerful vision. These traditions have been passed on to me, and it is my responsibility to honor them at this time as we embark on a new journey as Connecticut's only public liberal arts university.

My vision for Eastern is that it be a premier liberal arts college – while providing access to the citizens of Connecticut. That is exactly what the great state of Connecticut needs — a premier public liberal arts college. Why? Because Connecticut needs a liberally educated workforce — 93 percent of Eastern's students are from Connecticut, and they stay in Connecticut when they graduate.

This tradition of a classical liberal arts education has been the foundation of the modern private college experience in the United States. It is associated with the most honored and respected forms of education in higher education. Since the founding of Harvard College in 1636, America's private colleges – Amherst, Williams, Yale, and many others – have prepared the children of the social elite to become the economic and

political leaders of our society. Today, however, a private liberal arts education is within the reach primarily of the upper middle class.

The private institutions clearly have their role. We should be proud of the scholarship and advances in knowledge that have occurred at private colleges and universities, and I am pleased and honored to see colleagues from a number of private institutions here today. But it is not their mission to meet the needs of the general population. Even our land-grant institutions, given their mission, do not have the ability and cannot provide the attentive, personalized undergraduate education that a small, public liberal arts institution is positioned to provide.

One of the positive outcomes of this nation's social and cultural movements of the 1960's – civil rights, women's rights, and the explosion of artistic expression – was the realization that the qualities of a liberal education – the ability to think analytically, possess a broad cultural perspective, and recognize one's public responsibilities – did not have to be the exclusive right of the few and the privileged.

A small group of public colleges began to emerge throughout the 1960's and 1970's. They were positioned to provide a liberal arts education that was accessible and affordable to a broad, public constituency. Some of these institutions were founded as public liberal arts colleges at their outset. Sonoma State University opened in 1961. Evergreen State College, Dr. Purce's institution, opened in 1971. Ramapo College of New Jersey, which opened in 1969, also had a public liberal arts mission from its beginnings.

Other public liberal arts institutions such as Eastern, had long existed, and now focused their mission on the liberal arts while maintaining educational access at an affordable cost. In 1985, what is now Truman State University was designated by Missouri as that state's liberal arts institution. It is ranked the number one public liberal arts institution in the country. If Missouri can do it, Mr. Chairman, Connecticut can do it!

Since 1998 when the Board of Trustees honored Eastern with this designation as Connecticut's public liberal arts university, the University has made great progress. In 2004, we joined the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. And this coming year, thanks to the collaborative efforts of our faculty, we will fully implement our new Liberal Arts Core Curriculum, one which the faculty has worked on successfully for several years.

So, what is a liberally educated person? In medieval times, the liberal arts meant studying the classics in the original Greek and Latin. Today at Eastern, we have a more contemporary view of the liberal arts. What is our collective vision for our graduates? At Eastern we will strive to develop students who are capable of analytical thought and the ability to solve problems, independently or in collaboration with others.

Being a critical thinker means being willing to question the status quo, even to question ourselves. As Aristotle noted almost 2,500 years ago, "*It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.*" Our students in the sustainable energy program know that our country needs answers to the complex energy challenges before us. They investigate and search for solutions, guided by a strong science faculty as they work to solve the real problems of energy consumption in Connecticut.

In our majors, we support students to develop the confidence to hold unpopular viewpoints and the ability to articulate their positions in the marketplace of ideas.

Faculty members work with students to develop their ability to conduct independent research and to write about it, intelligently and clearly. This preparation, of course, allows our students to compete successfully for graduate school.

It is our responsibility to help our students to recognize relationships — between seemingly unconnected ideas and between unrelated disciplines. They do this easily when they have academic experiences in interdisciplinary courses which are team taught, such as art and environmental science. At Eastern, students must acquire adaptive skills, to be ready for the changes occurring in today's society. A January 2007 report of the Association of American Colleges and Universities concluded, *"In an economy fueled by innovation, the capabilities developed through a liberal education have become America's most valuable economic asset."*

Here at Eastern we expect our students to question their values, to exercise sound judgment and demonstrate ethical standards. The Liberal Arts Core curriculum holds dear this emphasis. The noted British scholar C. S. Lewis once remarked, *"Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil."*

As a public university, Eastern is committed to instilling a sense of social responsibility across our entire campus community as we connect the intellectual and experiential experiences of students. Eastern students, faculty, and staff give thousands of volunteer hours back to our Windham/Willimantic community each year.

When our students grasp the liberating power of their education, when the "light bulb goes on" — this is what we mean by the transformational power of the liberal arts. Armed with intellectual curiosity and citizenship skills, our students can truly make a difference in this world.

The term "artes liberales" comes from the Middle Ages and describes the education of the "free man." In the 1400s, free men were rich men, and the liberal arts were the training of the ruling class. Today, the public liberal arts education we offer at Eastern brings the tools of citizenship and empowerment to people regardless of class, and has the potential of creating leaders from all walks of life. So, I ask that when each of you thinks about Eastern, you think: "Eastern, the Liberal Arts at work!"

The students, faculty, staff, and administration of Eastern want this to be one of the premier public liberal arts universities in this country. We are very grateful to the Legislature — to every elected official — for the generous support they have given to Eastern. However, we cannot hope to reach this vision and fulfill our ambitions with only the support of our state budget and the tuition paid by our students. I realize we will never have the private fundraising capacity of the nation's top private colleges and universities — Harvard University alone has an endowment exceeding \$30 billion. I am so jealous. But we do have our own friends, many of them here in the room today, and they continue to show their generous support. To all our donors, especially our alumni, I say thank you for every dollar you have so generously donated to Eastern. We are proud of you! We have close to 25,000 alumni and our alumni association is working diligently to increase the financial contributions of our graduates.

Today, I hope to inspire everyone in this room, including our donors, of course, and those considering financially supporting the University, by announcing for the first time four of the largest gifts Eastern has ever received.

- Joseph and Dorothy Zaring are an incredible couple who live in Washington, D.C. Chancellor Carter gave me a tip and asked me to look at the farm on which Dorothy

Zaring grew up. I met with the Zaring's and after a great apple pie (Mr. Zaring is a baker) and six cups of coffee (I was nervous) – they committed to giving the University:

- 100 acres of land in Ashford – which is 12 minutes away.
 - An entire farm, with beautiful brooks and meadows!
 - A historic house and barn, with a donation of half million dollars to renovate it; and
 - One third of their entire estate!
 - The total gift is \$2.5 million dollars!
- In my second month here, I met with Ms. Sheila Flanagan from the SBM Charitable Foundation and asked if they would consider endowing scholarships for our students in the Early Childhood Program, a program in which they have great interest. Our faculty rank among the top researchers in the country in Early Childhood Education. They agreed. Last month, the SBM Charitable Foundation gave the University half a million dollars for the Early Childhood Program and endowed scholarships. The total gift, with state match, is almost 1 million dollars. Thank you SBM and Richard Meduski.
 - Last semester, Charles Hicks left Eastern \$1 million which is the largest gift from one private individual. His commitment to philanthropy has been expressed in this generous way. His advisors convinced him to invest in Eastern since they felt we had a significant role in the education of Connecticut residents.
And finally:
 - Dorothy Brown's mother, Doris Brown, came to Eastern in the 1920's, but had to abandon her dream to become a teacher to help her husband run their local business in Willimantic. The Brown family has left the University a gift of \$5 million. Ironically, it was the success of their local business that made this gift possible. This is the largest gift for Eastern in its history. What a generous and fantastic gift this is!!
 - With these gifts of approximately \$10 million, we will have significantly increased the size of our endowment.

Therefore, today I am pleased to announce, subject to approval by the Board of Trustees, that we will create an endowed chair at Eastern, to be housed in the Department of Biology.

The endowed chair in Biology will support one of our outstanding academic departments at Eastern. You might be interested to know that more biology graduates from Eastern have attended Yale University's Ph.D. program in micro/molecular biology than from any other undergraduate program in the U.S.A. These graduates go on to become leading research scientists and doctors, further evidence of the outstanding science programs at Eastern. This investment in science education, along with our new Science Building, will bring huge dividends to the state of Connecticut.

These four gifts are significant not only because they allow us to better serve our students, but also because they will inspire other friends of Eastern to invest in our future. I intend to personally commit much of my own time and energy during my administration to the task of raising more private funds for the benefit of our University. We are on a roll! GO WARRIORS!!

Today's celebration is not about me nor is it about Eastern only; it is in great part about public higher education in the United States. Eastern is one of more than 2,000

institutions of higher education in America. More than three-quarters of the 18 million students attending college in this country attend public institutions.

All of us are familiar with the statistics that show the added value in dollars of a college degree throughout one's work life. We also watch as more jobs leave our state and nation, bound for other countries. The economic importance of doing a better job educating our people seems clear and irrefutable.

I believe, however, that higher education, while preparing for gainful careers and contributing to the development of our workforce, has a more important purpose. I find myself talking to students and asking them to shift their focus slightly from just wanting to get a job after college to wanting and demanding an education that will prepare them for many more jobs after graduation. We are not simply, or even principally, training tomorrow's workforce. We are preparing our citizens for public life to participate in a great democracy.

Our system of public higher education has the ability to bind us together as a society. Even if we disagree, there is a place for reasonable discourse. Opportunity is available to all individuals through higher education; we can build a society where differences are respected and protected.

People of all races, whether they live in cities or in rural areas, deserve the social mobility that a college education can provide. There are many of you here today that are living proof that anyone in this country, with support and encouragement, can transcend social class to fulfill their dream. But we have much work left to do. People of color in this country still lag behind the majority in terms of college attendance and graduation rates. Among Latinos, the gaps are even more dramatic.

Horace Mann once said that education is "*the great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery.*" The simple truth is that we cannot continue to be the strongest nation on earth if we do not fully activate the balancing power of higher education. There are certainly signs of progress—at Eastern, for instance, 51 percent of our students this past fall were first-generation college students.

Broad access to a college education must continue to be one of the fundamental values of public universities, closely followed by a commitment to ensuring that these first-generation students graduate and enter society as productive, engaged citizens.

An educated population also ensures that we are and shall ever be a self-governed democracy of free people. You cannot have a great democracy without a first class public higher education system.

In his work, *Discourses*, the Greek philosopher Epictetus, said: "*Only the educated are free.*" The United States is known throughout the world as a great living experiment in how free men and women from all backgrounds can co-exist and prosper. I truly believe our country is great because its people have the opportunity to govern themselves. There is no other country like ours on the planet, where we come together from all corners of the globe to decide what laws we want passed, how we want to live, and who we want to represent us.

But this democracy only works if we all participate. If you get a college education and then do not give some of your time back to bettering society and participating in the democratic process, you have not fulfilled your responsibility in this society. This world has never needed leadership more, not from the few, but from the many, people who have the courage to do the right thing as they discover solutions to our

common problems. People who speak for those who otherwise cannot, for many reasons, speak for themselves.

Public higher education, by bringing together students from all walks of life and having them engage each other intellectually, culturally, and socially, has the ability to bring us together as people. Public universities like Eastern and our colleagues across this land have a special opportunity to energize this nation while preparing our next generation of leaders, people who can make a difference at their place of work and in their local communities, people who engage in the public debate essential to a government “by the people” and “for the people,” people who understand that it takes all of us to sustain this great experiment in democracy.

I meet with the students of Eastern, and I am moved beyond words as they tell me what they are doing, whether it is building houses in the South for the poor, whether it is working with a church in Bridgeport, Connecticut to tutor young people who cannot read, whether it is cleaning people’s yards in Willimantic with their hands and with dignity, or helping in the Soup Kitchen to feed those who have no food. Our students get it — it is in these acts that I find my inspiration each day. It is in the heart of each student as I go back in my mind to the days when I was 18 that I feel what they are feeling today. I am privileged each day to be in touch with my core values and to be able – with each action I take – to live a full and meaningful life.

The position of President gives me the opportunity to be alive with spirit, to have the spunk to speak up on behalf of all students from all walks of life and to live each day making a small contribution to this great American society. For this my friends, I feel privileged; for this my friends, I will be eternally grateful. Thank you.